

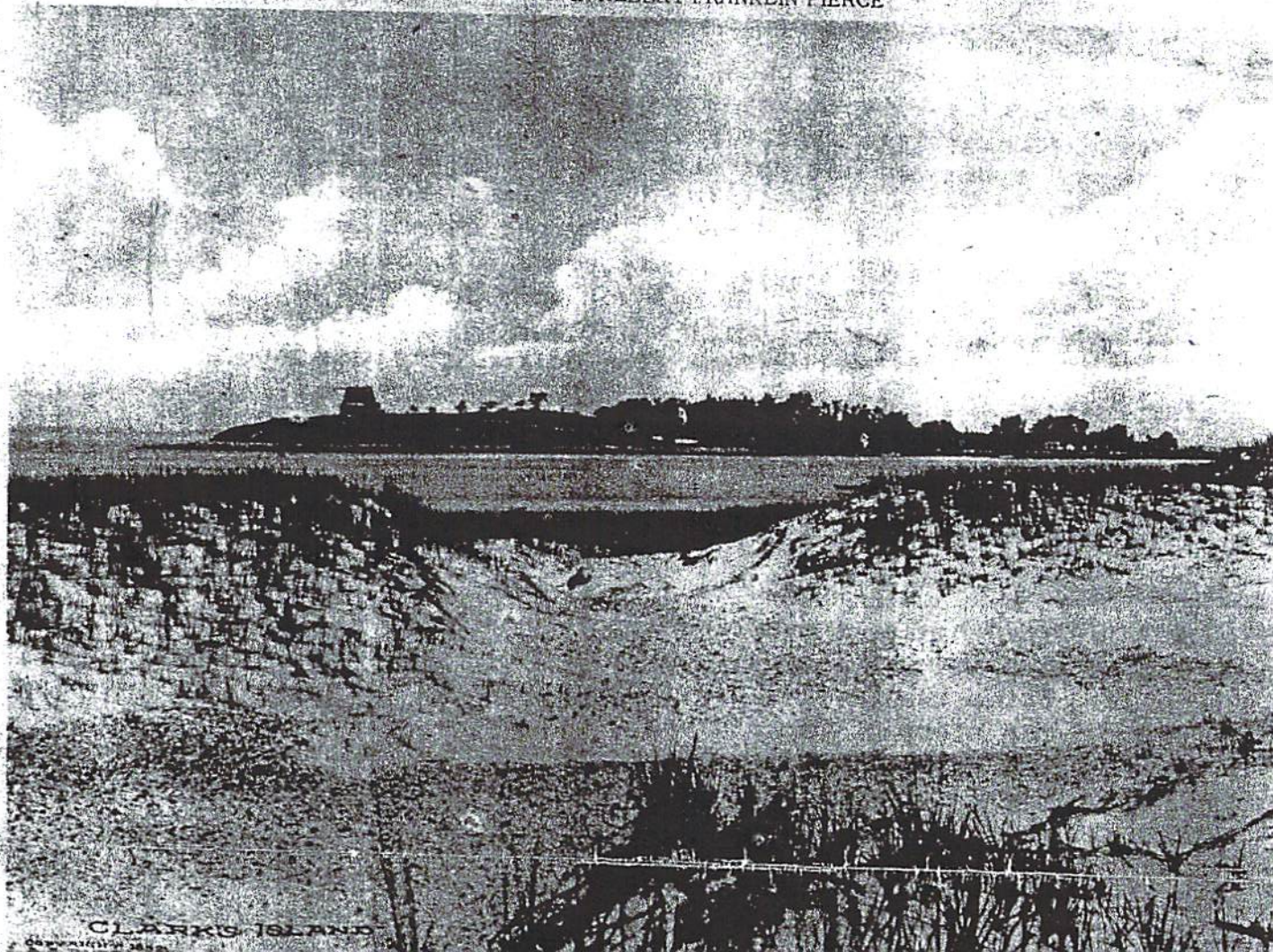
GURNET

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A HISTORY OF THE GURNET, SAQUISH AND CLARK'S ISLAND

BY CAPTAIN ALBERT FRANKLIN PIERCE



INTRODUCTION

A History of the Gurnet, Saquish and Clark's Island by Albert Franklin Pierce is a superb piece of folk literature. In 1969, Captain A.F. "Allie" Pierce, 92 years of Plymouth, is one of the last of the old-time shell backs that sailed before the mast. He has written a history compiled largely from memory and oral tradition and has preserved anecdotes in local history that might easily have been forgotten or perhaps never remembered. Men like him will never be seen again. He is one of the last remnants of the oldtime sailors who have been shouldered into history by the less rugged ways of the modern world they helped to create. Each year, the ranks of those who followed the sea in the tradition of Melville's Ahan, Ishmael, and Queequeg of Moby Dick fame or Richard Henry Dana, author of Two Years Before the Mast, dwindles. We are therefore most fortunate to have among us still, in this historically unique environment of Plymouth, a seaman who is, to a great extent, a part of Plymouth's maritime past and whose history will add to the preserving much of the area's lore.

HIS BIRTH

Captain Pierce was born on April 11, 1877, in Chiltonville. This was at the height of the period when the stately square-rigged ships still predominated the maritime scene and steam had not yet replaced the winds and sea currents as the major means of seafaring locomotion. He went to sea while still very young and spent one summer ashore before he was married in 1913. At twenty, he was the skipper of the sloop Gladys Lee. He has not only been the master of numerous vessels but has built ships for 75 years which have sailed from Scituate to the Cape and as far west as the Connecticut River. He remembers trawling in the spring until the first of May and then setting nets for mackerel in summer. His clear mind is filled with seafaring lore of which the following are examples:

He recalls the "big able vessel" Cora McKay of Provincetown, skippered by Captain McKay. While fishing off the Virgin Rocks on the Grand Banks, the Cora McKay slipped her anchor in a mighty gale and was lost without a trace (except her mooring buoys) of the 25 Provincetown men aboard. He told the story of Captain Wadsworth out of Duxbury, "a hard-bitten sailor." His wife was aboard his ship and about to give birth to a child when the ship was becalmed in the Indian Ocean and could not reach port. A son was born, aptly named Seaborn Wadsworth, and the mother died in childbirth. Desiring to bury his wife in the soil of her native Duxbury, Capt. Wadsworth placed her body in a cask of brandy and so preserved her as to avoid necessity of a sea burial. However, quite naturally, Wadsworth did not respond in exactly

the same way to his crew. When a sailor died at sea, Mr. Pierce recalled the simple service performed on the quarter-deck as handed down in oral tradition to him by his neighbor on Saquish, the Captain's son, Seaborn. "Ashes to ashes dust to dust, if God don't take him, the devil must," and so the body was committed, ever so briefly, to spend eternity in the deep. The spirit and tenor of the forecandle is herein demonstrated.

TOM LAWSON

Captain Pierce remembers seeing the ship Tom Lawson, the only seven-masted schooner ever built, loaded with oil in New York and bound out for Liverpool. It was Friday, the 13th of December, 1907. The ship's master, superstitious as many men are whose lives depend on the fates that the elements have in store, refused to sail. A new captain was requisitioned by the ship's owners

who would not suffer one day's loss of profits for the sake of superstition. The ship was lost at sea with all hands off the Scilly Islands between the Azores and England not long after leaving port. Although these seamen had the uncanny ability to pick their way through storm and fog by dead reckoning, the sounding lead or a mystic sense of smell still, even for seamen endowed with such a sixth sense, there were safer ways to make a living. Gales, collisions, shoals, and dangerous lee shores took a heavy toll of vessels and their crews.

MARITIME VITALITY

Mr. Pierce, in his conversation, has clearly demonstrated the maritime vitality of Plymouth in the early 19th century. He spoke of over 60 vessels bound out of Plymouth for the Grand Banks "registering a total of \$98,000 in the year 1800 for customs house receipts. When they took the

wharves away, they ruined Plymouth."

Capt. Pierce is related to many notables in Plymouth history. Although painted in the darkest shades by George Willison in Saints and Strangers, John Pierce held the patent of the old colony in 1622 and helped finance the Pilgrims while he was in England. Capt. Pierce is also a relative of Abraham Pierce, who owned the first estate

in the colony. He is a descendant of U.S. President Franklin Pierce, and his grandfather, Branch Pierce, deer hunted each autumn for many years with Senator Daniel Webster at Long Pond. Albert Franklin Pierce is, in short, a most fascinating man and we are delighted to have his history in our library's collection at Pilgrim Hall and his map of Clark's Island, subdivided by land holdings and titles, given to the Pilgrim Society in 1952.

L.D. Geller,

Director, Pilgrim Society
Plymouth, Mass.

The Gurnet was visited by Thorwald, son of Eric the Red, in the spring of 1004 and at that time, was covered with woods. The spot so charmed him, he exclaimed, "On this beautiful spot I should like to fix my dwelling!" Soon after he was wounded in a skirmish with the buried on the Gurnet.

The Gurnet and Plymouth were visited by Martin Pring in the year 1603 and by Siuer de Mants in 1605 with Champlain as pilot. He made a map which shows Saquish as an island and Brown's Bank the same as now. The Gurnet was granted in 1694 to John Doty, John Nelson and Samuel Lucas.

Sir Edmond Andros, as governor of New England, granted to Plymouth the Gurnet, Saquish and Clark's Island in 1688-1689. The fort on the Gurnet was built in 1776 by the towns of Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury and had a company of sixty men under Capt. William

Weston. The lighthouse was built in 1768, the first twin lighthouse on the coast. It remained a twin lighthouse until 1924 when Massachusetts ceded same to the Federal Government in 1790. It was destroyed by fire in July of 1801 and rebuilt in 1803. The first lighthouse keeper was a Mrs. Thomas. The fort was called Fort Andrew.

During the War of 1812, a few shots were exchanged with the British frigate "Niger," which sent boats and crews to burn

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the fishing vessels at Plymouth. The fort fired on the frigate and the return shot from the frigate put a ball through the lighthouse, the only lighthouse on the coast to be hit by enemy fire. The British, however, turned back.

The Gurnet contains about 27 acres of good soil. The name is derived from the gurnet-fish, which is found on the coast of Devonshire, England.

Saquish was granted to the town of Plymouth in 1638-39. Plymouth, in 1690, granted it to Ephraim and George Morton. In the earliest records, Saquish is called "Sagauquas" by the Indians, which means, "The place of many clams." It has an area of about seven acres of upland.

Edward Bangs was one of the early settlers and he conveyed the land to Manasah Kenton, who in turn conveyed these lands to his son-in-law, Ephraim Morton, whose heirs sold same to Elisfa Dotten in 1725. In 1741, Dotten sold out to Robert Bartlett, and in 1742, Bartlett transferred title to Benjamin Hanks,

who lived there for about four years before selling out to Saraus LeBaron in 1746. Hanks left Saquish and went west. His great-grandson Abraham Lincoln, was born in a log cabin in Kentucky, 63 years after he left Saquish.

The Burgesses owned Saquish from 1850 to 1860. Mr. Burgess came ashore from lobstering one day, only to find surveyors at work and upon questioning them, he was informed that the

Government was about to build a fort, which they did. It had a well sixty-five feet deep, and had a gun mounted on each of the four mounds of the fort.

After the Government abandoned the fort, a fisherman and his wife lived in the underground quarters, and the wife, having the evening meal prepared, went out to call her husband, only to find upon their return that the entire roof had caved in.

Mrs. Caroline Keefe Harney was born there on Aug. 24, 1873, and at that time her father was Sgt. Keefe of Fort Standish.

The Burgesses had a negro servant and upon her death, was buried near a large rock on the east side of Austin Lowell's lot, near the road.

The house now owned by George Harney was the guard-house of the fort and the house now owned by the Hamilton's was the barracks which had been moved down from the fort.

About the nineties, in the month of November, a big fleet of trawlers came into Saquish for a harbor and to torch herring for bait. Some of the men hired Joe Thurston's place and in large kettles, tried out the cod-livers which they had brought ashore.

The schoolhouse where the children from Clark's Island, Saquish and the Gurnet attended school was the middle one of the three, this side of the Gurnet. Near by, the site where the old Coast Guard Station once stood, there is buried in the sand, the wreck of an old Viking ship. It is just like the one now on exhibition in Pilgrim Hall. The hull washed

out once and J. Russell Harlow and I saw it. It is completely covered now and there is no record of it to be found.

There have been several wrecks on Saquish Beach and there is one near the Hall cottage, buried in the sand. It had come from the Carolinas loaded with corn and it dragged ashore in a storm. I have heard my grandfather tell of boating corn up to town.

Saquish was an island at high water before the ninety-eight storm, and lobster boats at that time, could go into the Gurnet Creek at high water. That storm filled it in and made it a part of the Gurnet.

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HISTORY OF: (Continued from Page 9)

Below the bank, near the old Parker Hall house, there was a small pond and ice was cut for home use in the winter.

When I first came to Saquish, approximately 70 years ago, the whole place was cleared land and one could pick to his content all the wild strawberries he wanted.

After the government gave up the fort, Delano and Keith purchased same. Mr. Keith came down to survey, but was at a loss to find anything to start from. The deed started from the old slippery elm tree which could not be found and no one knew where it was. Upon returning from lobstering one day, Mr. Keith asked me if I knew where the slippery elm was located and after dinner, with the aid of a shovel, I was able to locate the stump of the slippery elm, which had blown down in the '98 storm and had rotted away, had it not been for this, the place could not have been run out. Before the '98 storm, there were two cranberry bogs on Saquish but the storm filled them in and they were killed by the salt water.

The Indian village was evidently located in the vicinity of where I used to have my garden, the lots now owned by Harry Hunt. I have dug down post-holes, four feet deep and found shells and also many arrow-heads.

The main road across Saquish is named Hank's Avenue, after Nancy Hanks, who lived there about 1746.

About 1912, a Mr. Chase who came from Springfield, Mass., owned Saquish Beach, and at that time built a large house with a wharf and a small steamer made runs from Plymouth. The house, complete with well and a bathroom, had a beautiful large lawn with rosebushes, the loam for the grounds was carted down from the fort by Elisha Sampson by horse and tip-cart.

There came a big storm and washed the whole place away, as well as the Murphy house on a near-by lot and the only place that really held was the Dixon house, although in the sand dunes was anchored firmly on posts, and after the storm, one could walk under the house.

At the time of the storm, the tide was so high that Peiffer's Point was all under water

and their cellar on the Point filled with water. The tide came up to the cellar door at my place.

The channel to Clark's Island, at that time, came be-

tween Saquish and the Island about half way between and one winter, a big ice formed between Saquish and the Island and blocked the whole place and opened a new channel, where the present one is now.

About 1920, there were three fish traps off Saquish. Harry Hunt had one and a large power boat to carry fish to Boston.

Mr. Zenas Crowell made the blue prints for Saquish and laid out the lots for Sam Burgess. The lots sold for \$75 each.

During the ninety-eight storm, the sloop "Venus" out of Gloucester came ashore in the cove inside and the crew went into the old farm house

to stay until they could get the vessel off. Mr. Burgess came down from Duxbury and ordered them out and they then went over to Joe Thurston's place to stay. The next winter, when no one was living on Saquish, the farm house was broken into again and everything smashed up, including dishes and furniture.

Mr. Homer, an antique dealer from New York owned the big house, formerly the barracks and in viewing the pieces of china from the farm house which had been broken, stated that if they were whole, he would have given \$500 apiece for several of them. The old farm house

had a fireplace in every room with a huge open one in the kitchen and under the stairs, a place to smoke ham and bacon.

When I first came to Saquish Nate Crowell and myself picked cockles. We had a large car to keep them in and a vessel came once a week to pick up our catch, usually taking 150 buckets at 75 cents a bucket. Shortly, I built a boat and went lobstering. At that time, Joe Thurston, Charles Briggs and J.R. Harlow were lobstering from Saquish. John Hurley and Kelley and Burt Russell soon arrived to live at Saquish.

(To be Continued)